

CHICAGO - U.S. Representatives Mark Kirk and Judy Biggert joined with environmental leaders today to call for the passage of federal legislation boosting beach water quality monitoring following a new national report on the safety of Illinois beaches. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council's (NRDC) "Testing the Waters" report, there were 793 beach safety advisory days in Illinois in 2007 – an increase of 34 percent from 2006. 23 percent of Illinois beach water samples failed the national daily health standard – 17 beaches failed the standard more than 25 percent of the time. An EPA pilot epidemiological study estimated that nearly 300 people could expect to contract a respiratory illness after swimming in Lake Michigan on a summer weekend due to elevated pathogen levels in the water, including the bacteria *E. coli*.

In addition to health concerns, there are an economic costs associated with beach closures. According to a University of Chicago study, swim bans at Chicago beaches cost the local economy about \$2.4 million each year in lost revenue.

"The Great Lakes are the crown jewel of the Midwest, and we should ensure that future generations can enjoy safe, clean drinking water," said Congressman Kirk, co-chair of the Great Lakes Taskforce. "While the findings of the NRDC report highlight alarming water quality issues at our beaches, the silver lining is that we lead the nation in beach monitoring. More than half of all Great Lakes beaches aren't monitored – in Illinois, 75 percent of beaches are tested. Congress needs to boost its commitment to water safety testing by passing the Beach Protection Act to help identify the sources of bacteria that threaten the health of the public."

"In Chicago, our lake is our treasure," said Congresswoman Biggert. "It's drinking water for 30 million Americans, and it's a driving force behind the Midwest's economy. We need to do more to protect Lake Michigan from containments that are increasingly threatening the safety of beachgoers and the environment."

The Beach Protection Act (H.R. 2537) reauthorizes the BEACH Act, which since 2000 has improved states' beach monitoring programs and the processes for alerting the public of potential health risks from contamination at beaches. To date, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency dispersed more than \$51 million in grants to states, municipalities and tribes. The Beach Protection Act authorizes \$40 million per year from 2009 to 2012 and requires enhanced public notification of pathogen indicators. The legislation passed the House in April and now awaits action in the Senate.

Representatives Kirk and Biggert also called for efforts to limit the primary causes of beach closures. According to the NRDC, nationwide storm water runoff accounts for 40 percent of beach closings, with sewage accounting for 16 percent. In Illinois, the causes of beach closures are unknown, although high concentrations of gull populations and lawn fertilizers may be contributing factors.

“The first step to protect the public is to identify problem beaches and the source of their contamination,” Congressman Kirk said. “We then need to go after the root causes. More than 24 billion gallons of sewage are dumped annually into the Great Lakes. Chicago and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago have done an excellent job in boosting our storm water and sewage system treatment capacity. But while we dug the ‘Deep Tunnel,’ cities like Detroit, Cleveland and Milwaukee dug the ‘Not-so-deep Tunnel.’ That is why Congress also needs to pass the Great Lakes Protection Act (H.R. 2907). Congressman Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.) and I introduced this bipartisan legislation to set a federal date certain on banning sewage dumping. If we can get other cities to follow Chicago’s lead, we’ll help ensure cleaner, safer drinking water for years to come.”

Current penalties for dumping sewage are capped at \$25,000 per violation per day, and penalty funds return to the U.S. Treasury. The Great Lakes Water Protection Act would increase those penalties to up to \$100,000 per violation per day after 2027.

The bill would also create a Great Lakes Clean-Up Fund within the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (SRF). Penalties collected would go into this fund and be reallocated to the states surrounding the Great Lakes. These funds will be spent on wastewater treatment options, with a special focus on habitat protection and wetland restoration. The bill also requires greater transparency for volume and occurrences of sewage dumping by states surrounding the Great Lakes.

Joining the Representatives were NRDC Midwest Program Director Henry Henderson and Shedd Aquarium Director of Great Lakes Awareness Melanie Napoleon.

A listing of 2007 10th District beach closures and a map of Illinois beach closure rates are below. More information on the NRDC report is available at <http://www.nrdc.org/water/oceans/ttw/titinx.asp>

2007 10th District Beach Advisories

260 beach days in 10th District – a 120% increase over 2006:

Winnetka: 75
Great Lakes: 47
Waukegan: 40
Highland Park: 29
Lake Forest: 27
Glencoe: 18
Wilmette: 9
Lake Bluff: 9
Kenilworth: 6